



PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN IRANIAN REVOLUTION

Dr. Jyotika Teckchandani

Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Social Sciences, Amity University, Noida.

The most unique feature of the Iranian revolution which unfolded between 1977 and February 1979, Iran was the active participation of the women. Like other social groups, their reasons for opposing the Shah were varied: economic deprivation, political repression and gradual identification with Islamism. Women participated in the revolution primarily as Iranians who opposed the Pahlavi government and not as women per se. Women shared the same basic complaints about the regime as men. They too opposed the repression and corruption of the Pahlavi regime and experienced the economic hardship which accompanied increasing inflation.

It is interesting to note that they were also considered to be the major beneficiaries of the reforms brought by the Pahlavi regime such as increased opportunities for education and public employment, right to vote, and the family law that provided women right to initiate divorce and making it more difficult for a man to take more than one wife.

In order to understand the nature of women's participation in the Iranian revolution a brief examination of Shah's modernization policy and its impact on the different segments of Iranian women is required at the outset.

Pitfall of Shah's Modernization Policy

The Family laws of the 60's and 70's were the flagship of the state modernization policies during the Shah regime. The state constructed the modern women in three different ways. On the one hand, urban centers were exposed to the conception of women as sex objects through the mass media. On the other hand, state policy on the family attempted to regulate female sexuality in accordance with the Islamic Shariat. Thirdly, in responding to the pressures of the national development, the state formulated the policies which contained emancipatory potentials for women.¹

The ways in which the positions of women were affected by Shah's modernization programme were different in case of rural and urban women. As a result of the Land reform the need for female and child labor on the peasant's family plots increased tremendously. A majority of the Iranian peasants received very small and fragmented plots of land. The male head of the household and elder sons migrate to towns and cities in search of construction or industrial jobs to increase the cash income of the family, leaving the field work to women. This process increased the exploitation of women especially since the technological innovations did not reach women and also because they worked either as family workers or were paid half of the male wage. The expansion of the carpet market further intensified the exploitation of the rural women.

As to the situation of the urban women the process of modernization worked differently for different categories. Urban women from the lower strata included those who had migrated from the rural areas to towns. The women moved to the towns either in search of employment or for educational purposes or followed their men folk. The urban life provided these women with better health facilities, social amenities education, modern entertainment as well as improved cash income. These women worked as cooks, cleaners and factory workers etc.

Women in the poor migrant neighborhoods were exposed to two different role models in the 1970's. On the one hand they were exposed to portrayals of unveiled, modern sophisticated women of the entertainment world or members of the royal families on their television screens, magazines etc. Women came to realize that the government was trying to encourage the image of women as painted playthings and tried to encourage their dependence on western products as make-up and fashion, thus, binding women to western markets. An example of this view can be seen in the then popular magazine, *Zan-e-Ruz*.² The Shah's government was behind the publication of this magazine which featured articles about fashion, movie stars, horoscopes, beauty contest etc. This actively promoted the image of women as beautiful objects in order to distract women from religion and politics.

On the other hand, the social activities of these women consisted of religious gatherings of rowzeh, sofreh or attending the sacred shrines. In these gatherings a different type of women was being addressed and constructed by the male or female

preacher who was at the centre of these gatherings. The preacher's tale of sacrifices made for Islam by the devoted daughter of Prophet Mohammad and Shii emaman and the virtues of the chaste women of Islam were often accompanied by criticism of un-Islamic appearance and behavior of the women in the rich districts of Tehran.³

Young women from the relatively more affluent lower or middle strata who had better access to education and vocational training turned to office work, sales, or professions such as nursing and teaching. Female education expanded rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s. The average annual growth rate of enrolment of female students in different levels of education during 1961-71 was 13 percent for primary schools, 30 percent for high schools, 88 percent for technical and vocational colleges, 76 percent for teacher training institutions and 65 percent for higher education.⁴ Women attended university in great numbers, but fewer women succeeded in competing with men for scarce university places and they mostly studied traditionally 'feminine' subjects such as literature and the humanities.⁵

Most female high schools and college graduates took up employment in the service sector. Teaching was the number one profession amongst women and nursing was almost exclusively a female profession, at least at its non managerial levels.⁶

It did result in the integration of urban women into the economy and opened many hitherto closed fields of activity to middle and upper-class women. As the barriers of the honor of the family, women were caught between contradictory expectations. The state on the one hand opened the doors to them to go out to the university and take up paid employment, and, on the other hand, constructed them as sex objects. The family demanded the extra income brought in by the woman, but refused to release her from the patriarchal control. Many well educated women ended up as housewives against their wishes because of pressure from men or the state's inability to provide jobs. The gap between the ideal patriarchal orders, in which the sex roles were clearly defined, and the contradictory demands of the modern state and family on the women further increased as a result to the response of "Great Civilization."⁷ The view that the westernization of Iran under the Pahlavi's did not bring about the political freedom, national independence and the social progress that the constitutionalists at the turn of the century has aspired to was fast gaining ground. On the other hand, it was believed modernization had reinforced foreign dependence and also has threatened the moral fabric of society. Furthermore, the illusion that state modernization and women's emancipation were necessary corollaries was shattered because of contradictory effects and unfulfilled promises of westernization. All this made it imperative for the new generation of the intelligentsia to put aside the West as a viable model for Iranian society and develop alternative model for Iranian society which presented the right solutions for society's ills.

Moreover, the reforms had different impact on the different categories of women. There was a question of how significant the voting rights were when the election was viewed as rigged, and men often found ways to get around the newly established laws governing the family relationships by taking advantage of their wife's ignorance or economic dependence. Under the Pahlavi's the role of civil society was also minimized. As a result, the weakness of the civil society obfuscated the nature of the reforms and limited their scope. Hence, the educated and the employed women suffered the same dissatisfaction as men.

Gradually, oppositions to modernization as it related to women developed in various directions. The secular response to modernization suggested that Iranian society should shake off the *gharbzadegi* with which it had become polluted. The concept of *gharbzadegi*, literally meaning to be stuck by the West, was popularized by Jalal-Al Ahmad; a well respected literary figure.⁸ He criticized 'polluted' popular culture and called upon Iranians to abandon their unreserved embrace of Western materialism and consumerism. This cultural alternative constructed woman as 'modern –yet- modest'. It rejected 'the painted dolls of Pahlavi regime; and advocated preservation of modesty for modern Iranian women.'⁹

The other secular alternative to 'The Great Civilization' was provided by the Marxist- Leninist left. Marxist- Leninist groups conducted a limited but influen-

tial campaign in the 1970s in protest against state policies on women. Women were defined as victims of Iran's dependence on the West and state policies on women were dismissed as tools of the imperialist exploitation of Iranian women. Within this framework, the objective of modernization was seen to be the utilization of women as consumers and cheap labour to further the interests of American imperialism in Iran. Women who were seen to have benefited from modernization were considered accomplices in this imperialist conspiracy. While lower class women were portrayed as passive victims of the regime's oppression, affluent women were condemned as sex objects, accomplices of the Shah and oppressors of lower class women. Women's participation in the guerilla movement drew many female members and sympathizers from the lower and middle classes. Women's participation in the guerilla movement reflected the pattern of women's entry to all spheres of society.

The 1960's and the 70's also witnessed the rise of the religious response to modernization. In 1966-67, when the debates on the Family Protection Law began, Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, a professor of theology at Tehran University published a series of essays in *Zan-e Ruz* (Today's Women) on issues such as divorce, polygamy; inheritance rights etc.¹⁰ He claimed that Shari'a was equal, or superior to western law.¹¹ He believed that all contemporary problems in family relations could be resolved if the gender regulations of the Shari'a were applied in the true spirit of Islam.¹² This did not mean that men and women were equal. Motahhari argued that gender inequities were justified because men and women were biologically different. Pregnancy and child rearing functions sapped women's energy. Women did not benefit from the economic equality, because it required them to shoulder two set of responsibilities: their family chores, which are a women's natural and instinctual function, and their modern job requirements. Therefore, it was incumbent upon men to provide for them.¹³

He was against those who opposed women's right to advanced education, because skilled female doctors and surgeons were necessary for gender segregated social order he envisioned. He also believed that creating Islamic charities and social services, as well as reenacting Islamic rituals, would bring about a more ethical Muslim community, create a healthier identity for women, and put an end to destructive western influences.¹⁴

The core of the Motahhari's argument was his differentiation of the sphere of social from family.¹⁵ In his view, the Islamic hejab was an important device created to preserve the separation of the sphere of family from civil society and it was women's responsibility to preserve it. He also advocated monogamy as the natural form of marriage and that the true Islam has confined polygamy strictly to certain conditions.¹⁶

Ali Shariati, on the other hand supported greater social and educational accomplishments for women and did not call for a gender segregated society. He encouraged women's social and political participation and rejected the stereo type of traditional home maker and housewife. He advised Iranian women to learn more about freedom fighters in the Algerian, Irish and Palestinian movements and criticized the western media for promoting frivolous female characters as role models. Shariati's women had to fit into two important criteria. Her embrace of modernity was not to interfere with her responsibility as a wife or mother, or with her commitment to Islam.

Shariati held up Fatemah, the youngest daughter of Muhammad, the wife of Ali and mother of Hussein as the ultimate role model for Iranian women. He praised her total devotion to her father, her unconditional support to her husband, her love and care for her sons, and her sacrifices for Islam. Shariati's book, "Fatemah is Fatemah" built up the ideal type of Fatemah and made her relevant to the modern world.¹⁷

He condemned the western Cultural Revolution, especially the sexual liberation of women. In his attempt to free women from being sexual objects Shariati desexualized women; there was no place for women's sexual instinct in his theory. In order to work side by side and participate in Shii struggle, the new militant Shii youth, both male and female were called upon to purify their souls from 'Freudian sexual liberation'.¹⁸ The thousands of young people who attended Shariati's lecture tended to accept this. The new Shii militant women wore a scarf over her head and desexualized her body by wearing loose fitting clothes.

The revolutionary leaders talked about special worth and respect for women and this message was able to mobilize thousands of women into revolutionary action. It was portrayed again and again that the end result of the Pahlavi state's female emancipation was the gharbzadeh women of the seventies. This was a woman who lived under the influence of Western culture and therefore came to embody at once all social ills: she was a super-consumer of imperialist/capitalist/foreign goods; she was a propagator of the corrupt culture of the west; she was undermining the moral fabric of society; she was a parasite beyond any redemption.¹⁹

Public discontent increased due to factors such as inflation, mass migration and urbanization, drastic food and housing shortages and anger on the conspicuous western style consumption on the part of the wealthy. In January 1978, the publication of article about Ayatollah Khomeini led to massive religious riots and protests. This was joined by wider sections of society including women. By May 1978, opposition spread within the various branches of state. The protest

strikes were spread all across the country by the autumn of 1978. The strike at Tehran oil refinery was followed by Abadan oil refinery and other major industries and factories. Finally, the Shah fled and left the country the council of Islamic revolution formed by Khomeini took over.

In fact the process of modernization did not uproot religion in Iran because the state allowed Islam to flourish at the grass root level while controlling the political digression of the institution of Shiism. The religious response to western style modernization was not a return to pre-modern traditions rather it integrated itself with modern structures and institutions, and a modern political ideology.

Ayatollah Khomeini conveyed his pride in the way women rejected the gharbzadeh women by their participation in the revolution: 'Any nation that has women like the Iranian women will surely be victorious'.²⁰ He promised them real freedom; equality and dignity. Khomeini's statements were couched in general terms and allowed women to interpret them in their own ways. He emphasized over and over again that:

"As for women, Islam has never been against their freedom. It is, to the contrary, opposed to the idea of woman-as-object and it gives her back her dignity. A woman is man's equal; he and she are both free to choose their lives and their occupations. But Shah's regime is trying to prevent women from becoming free by plunging them into immorality. It is against this that Islam rears up. This regime has destroyed the freedom of men as well, as women. Women as well as men swell the population of Iranian prisons, and is where freedom is threatened. We want to free them from the corruption menacing them."²¹

Khomeini's message gave women a feeling of security and importance. He emphasized in an interview that women would be free to choose their own clothing within the frame work of decency and revolutionary women believed him. The prospect of veiling in the near future seemed inconceivable in the context of anti-autocratic revolution. Thus, the Shii leadership was able to persuade most sections of the nation to fight against the Shah under the united banner of cultural nationalism, even if an Islamicised one.²²

Revolutionary symbols and the role models

Revolutionary symbols and role models defined the authentic cultural construction of women. An important symbol of resistance to the imported culture which appeared in the revolutionary movement was women's hejab. To wear the hejab became a women's way of enacting the revolutionary demand of respect and social value for women. The hejab became the symbol of rejection of Pahlavi values.²³ Reza Shah's programme of modernization of women's position began by forcibly unveiling women on a massive scale. Women were then forced to adopt western clothes and change their values overnight in accordance with the dress.

Women from different classes wore hejab for different reasons.²⁴ While, some did so because it symbolized their protest against the treatment of women as sex objects, other wore it as a religious duty. Hejab became a symbol for empowerment and enabled women to participate in the public sphere without being humiliated or harassed and moreover, it portrayed women as free, nonsexual, politically aware, and in solidarity with the revolution.²⁵ Some women wore hejab when participating in demonstrations which took place on religiously significant days, but did not wear it in other demonstrations.

The representation of women as Islamic and veiled proved central to the triumph of the revolutionary ethos.²⁶ The significance of women for the success and legitimization of the revolution included the promotion of an Islamic and Shii heritage that would revive the identification of society's moral and ethical values.

Another unusual feature of the revolution was the use of Zainab, sister of Imam Hussein, as a role model for inspiring political opposition among women.²⁷ Women were encouraged to emulate her. She is best known for her supporting role at the Battle of Karbala, caring for children while the men were engaged in fighting. However, after her brother's death she came to the fore, speaking out openly and effectively against his enemies. Zainab had even divorced her husband in order to accompany her brother to Karbala.

In more peaceful times, it was Prophet's daughter and Zainab's mother, Fatemah, who served as the primary role model for women in her capacity as the ideal daughter, wife and mother. She was self sacrificing and raised exceptional children two imams and Zainab; it is these virtues for which she is best remembered and women were advised to imitate her in their lives.²⁸

Traditionally, women were excluded from religious processions but now thousands of veiled women could take part. For many of them this was an opportunity to feel as close as men did to the Karbala battle, the recitations of which they had listened through out their lives. The anti-Shah demonstrations which took part on religiously significant days were treated by many women as religious occasions and a rare opportunity to play an equal part in religious activities. The all embracing slogan of freedom, independence, Islamic Republic became the trademark of the Iranian Revolution. The issue of women's liberation was made central to the revolutionary demand for the overthrow of the Shah and was voiced by a nation of men and women on behalf of women. Mass demonstrations shouted slogans against the conception of women as sex objects and demanded respect and social

value for women.²⁹

Demands of women

The women participants in the revolution had no clear gender agenda while participating in the revolution.³⁰ Women did not rally around the gender specific demands; instead they placed their faith in the revolution as their savior, in fact as a guarantee that all problems would be solved after the removal of the Shah. Few of the women activists did make a distinction between the more general social and the political issues and those that affected them as women per se. Although they criticized the wide-spread inequities practiced against women, they blamed the regime for these and hoped that the change would bring democracy and freedom, that the revolution would create a more egalitarian environment which would curb the moral anarchy of the Pahlavi Iran by ameliorating social and cultural disorganization. There was however an understanding that the goals of the Islamic Revolution included respect for women and appreciation of their position in society. Thus, women participated in the anti-Shah movement with unfocused demands. They took part in the movement but defined their participation and demand as freedom, independence and social equality.³¹ The women's question was considered to be the natural appendix to these demands.³²

Moreover, women did not think that as a group, what they in particular would gain from the revolution, they believed that as a group they were specifically invited to join the revolution. Their participation was solicited and encouraged by the leaders of the revolution. Women's activism emerged only after the newly established IRI launched its assault on women.³³

Nature of Participation

Women became massively involved in the anti-Shah demonstrations and joined the crowds of protestors as early as in spring 1978 and throughout the revolution participated in almost all kinds of oppositional activities. However, the leadership of the movement was exclusively male, female leaders did not emerge.³⁴

As long as women participated as rank and file, they were free to choose for themselves which aspects of the struggle they wished to take up. Women participated in peaceful and violent demonstrations; they dug trenches and participated in street battles; they joined strikes, boycotts and stoppages at work; they participated in the activities of the local militia group, and took part in the guerilla attacks against government installations. In August 1978, six women were put on trial by the state for creating disorder in Tehran bazaar.³⁵ Many women were killed during the street clashes with the riot police, Cinema Rex and Black Friday events and some were killed in the guerilla activities. Women sometimes led the procession and offered flowers to soldiers to prevent them from shooting.³⁶ This tactic usually had traumatic effect on the young soldiers. Women's participation in strikes was widespread in all major public and private organizations and industries.

But in addition to personal participation in revolutionary events, the main role played by women was that of sustaining and nourishing the revolutionary movement.³⁷ Women supported and organized the oppositional activities of their families, relatives, friends and neighbours. They faced the death and injuries of the loved ones through courage and strength. Women felt it to be a revolutionary duty to give blood and keep the hospitals going by offering clean bedding. Female doctors and nurses worked round the clock to provide medical assistance to the wounded in hospital and those in hiding in homes. Women often offered the protection of their homes to the demonstrators being chased by the riot police. They fed and offered bed to friends of their husbands, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters who stayed with them during the curfew hours to plan the next day's action. Women supported neighborhood oppositional activities. They offered food to the local mosque and protected the local militia. Women played an important role in the circulation of oppositional literature and tapes and spread the latest BBC news and revolutionary slogans in a short span of time through women specific networks of rowzeh and sofreh.

The first category of women who participated in the revolution came from the families where for two or three generations women have been integrated in the development of the modern centralized state administration.³⁸ Their parents have been in such professions as teaching and nursing or have performed secretarial or clerical labour of all kinds. For the children of such men and women the accelerating growth of employment opportunities opened up wider horizons for the practice and extension of their intellectual and occupational skills. This layer of the urban middle class also had to work, given the conditions of high prices and consumption level. Many young women students and white collar workers from this generation were growing socially more aware, and naturally were affected by the general political repression instituted under the Shah's regime. It was women of this background who provided the cadres from organizations like the Fedaeen guerillas and other groups on the left in particular. These women were in the forefront of the struggles for the organization of women's groups fighting for the extension of the women's rights. Those who joined the political parties were instrumental in urging them to respond to the struggles of women and succeeded in allocating a great deal of political and organizational attention to it. Others organized women at the work places, particularly in government offices and departments.

The second category of women came from the most traditional urban petit bour-

geoisie families (from the bazaar merchants and their associates, craftsmen and other traditional independent producers and distributors).³⁹ Under the impact of partial industrialization and the rise of large scale, often monopolized distribution networks, the young women of these families were forced to seek the expansion of the state administration and social services provided them with the opportunity of seeking jobs as teachers, nurses and so on. These women had to go through the very painful and traumatic experience of first generation adjustment. The hold of Islam in these families was much strong. Women had been brought up since childhood with a certain concept of what their role was and what proper Islamic values and patterns were. This included the wearing of the veil. As young women from such families began to go to universities or work in hospitals and government offices, their values came under daily attack from the alien surroundings, where women mixed with men, wore no veils, and dressed according to the latest European fashion. Women were often torn between accepted family norms and the pressure of the new environment. Thus, they began to see Islam as their saviour. Islam's emphasis on the sanctity of the family, they believed, would restore women's virtue and their dignity in the society.⁴⁰

Third category included the landless peasants who migrated to Tehran mainly settled in the slums and formed an underemployed proletariat.⁴¹ Tehran's shantytowns became the locus of much of the anti-government protest and generated the first waves of a storm which put an end to the long lasting monarchical rule in Iran. Migrant women played a significant role in the resistance of the slum dwellers to the government's recurrent attempts to remove them from their homes in late 1977 and 1978.

Male-Female interaction in the Revolution

For women, the most liberating experience of the revolution was the sense of freedom to mix with men without being harassed.⁴² Women were now addressed as sisters and treated as such. The question of sexual division of responsibility did not come in the way of male-female solidarity against the Shah. Women were left free to decide which aspect of struggle they wanted to take up. Many women had the blessings of their families when they took part in the revolution, but those who did not have found it easier to disobey by stating participation in the revolution as their religious duty. Women repeatedly cited the example of Zainab, who divorced her husband to support the Shi'i struggle against the Sunni tyranny. Women felt independent and free, and the more they were respected the more they joined in. Women found a new secure place within the revolutionary culture and were determined to fill it.

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